

Evaluation: Are we making a difference?

February 1999

A lot of our professional training in evaluation is based on research models that measure changes in the health status of the population. While this type of rigorous evaluation is critical to public health practice, it's not feasible or even appropriate when evaluating a small, focused intervention such as a bicycle helmet distribution project or a community effort to increase physical activity.

With clear, realistic objectives we can develop indicators that tell us if a program resulted in changes. These can be changes in attitude, knowledge or behavior, and in some cases improved health status. We can also measure changes in how a community addresses a need and what local policies and environmental supports are put in place. The question is not, "Should we evaluate?" but "What is the most effective way to evaluate a program within existing resources?"

Why Evaluate?

Evaluation should:

- **Provide accountability** to your funders, stakeholders and the community. Good evaluations help convince people that they invested wisely, and help both managers and funders understand the purpose of a program and what it achieved.
- **Improve program quality.** Evaluation provides feedback to staff and partners about which interventions are working and which aren't. It helps to determine if the program is proceeding as intended and what improvements can be made.
- **Help allocate resources.** Evaluation can help you decide what resources you need and whether you are using them effectively.

Health educators struggle with the question, "Does my program make a difference?" Just counting the number of pamphlets we distribute doesn't tell us much. Our funders and policy makers expect results. How do we measure success?

Types of Evaluation

Evaluations come in many sizes and shapes depending on what you want to learn. The most common type of evaluation monitors and documents program activity. This is **process evaluation**. It provides feedback on what the program did, how often, and with whom. It is usually the least expensive. By itself, it will not tell you the impact your program has on knowledge, attitude, or behavior.

Impact evaluation measures the short term effects of a program. It can measure changes in knowledge, attitude, skills, behavior, policies, or the environment. It involves collecting baseline data to compare changes before, during, and after a program is implemented.

Measuring long-term effects and changes in individual or community health status is called **outcome evaluation**. It is useful and appropriate for programs with multiple interventions, sustained over a period of time. This type of evaluation also involves collecting baseline data to compare changes in behavior and health status.

Before You Evaluate, Ask Yourself:

Is it useful?

Will the results be used to improve performance or allocate resources more effectively? Will the evaluation answer stakeholders' questions? Will it be useful in developing new program proposals, in reauthorizing existing programs, in justifying requests for more funding?

Is it feasible?

Given your political environment and current resources, what type of evaluation can you afford? Do you have support from your organization to conduct it? Does your budget allow for an outside contractor? Or will you need to allocate personnel, time, and other resources to do it in-house? If you can't evaluate all aspects of your program, decide what parts are the most important.

Can we conduct it properly?

Is the approach fair and ethical? For example, in conducting a survey, the responses usually are kept confidential. Is your organization truly able to maintain confidentiality with the types of data processing and analysis necessary?

Will it be accurate?

Are you using the right data collection methods and are you collecting data consistently? For example, if you have several people conducting interviews, you need to provide adequate training to ensure consistency and quality.

Steps in Planning an Evaluation

1 Decide what you want to evaluate

- What are you trying to accomplish or change?
- What activities are planned?
- Who will be involved?

2 Select evaluation measures

- What questions do you and your stakeholders want answered?
- What is the primary purpose of the evaluation?
- What was done?
- How much was done?
- For whom was it done?
- What changes occurred?

3 Design data collection and measurement tools

- What resources are available to conduct the evaluation?
- Where will you obtain the data?
- Will you use both qualitative and quantitative data?
- How will you collect the data?
- How will you analyze the data?
- Are the methods culturally appropriate for the individuals and communities involved?

4 Develop an action plan

- Who will carry out the evaluation?
- What are the specific tasks and time lines?

5 Share the results

- Who should see the results?
- How will you share them?

Where Else to Look

Planned Approach to Community Health: Guide for the Local Coordinator

Chapter 6 “Evaluating PATCH” provides extensive discussion of the process of evaluating all phases of this program. It includes a worksheet on the five steps to planning evaluation, a discussion on using evaluation results, a glossary and extensive bibliography.

CDC National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 1996
Mail Stop K-46, 4770 Buford Highway, N.E.
Atlanta, GA 30341

To get a copy contact Washington State Department of Health Warehouse: 360-586-9046

Evaluating Community Efforts to Prevent Cardiovascular Diseases

This handbook provides practical tools and strategies for measuring the products, effects, and outcomes resulting from community efforts to prevent cardiovascular disease. The tools and strategies are applicable in the evaluation of a variety of health promotion interventions.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources, 1995
Technical Information Service Branch
National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion
CDC Mail-Stop K-13, 4770 Buford Highway, N.E.
Atlanta, GA 30341-3724

A Field Guide to Outcome-Based Program Evaluation

This guide is one of several excellent resources developed by the Evaluation Forum. It reviews the issues one faces when designing evaluations. It includes practical applications and clear instructions for designing program evaluations for specific needs.

The Evaluation Forum
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Health Education Resource Exchange in Washington

Web site: <http://www.HEREinWA.org>

This on-line clearinghouse of people, projects, tools, and resources in Washington state includes a description of the latest and most popular books on program evaluation. Look under the Health Educator’s Bookshelf.

Evaluating Health Promotion Programs

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Web site: <http://www.utoronto.ca/chp/hcu/hcu-publications.html#workbooks.com>